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THE CIA IN TRANSITION

New Era of Mistrust Marks Congress' Role

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Ten years ago today, 72 senators voted to assert a stronger role for Congress in overseeing the vast U.S. intelligence apparatus in the wake of painful disclosures, scandals and abuses at the Central Intelligence Agency and the collection of secretive federal agencies known as the U.S. intelligence "community."

The hope was to end an era of suspicion, to narrow the number of congressional committees that had jurisdiction over the intelligence budget, to cut down on leaks of classified information and to set up a strong, permanent monitoring body to restore integrity and confidence in America's intelligence-gathering capabilities.

But after a decade, a new era of mistrust has dawned.

The Reagan administration is virtually at war with the two committees that were established to oversee the U.S. intelligence arm. Each side has accused the other of endangering the nation's most sensitive intelligence systems and jeopardizing covert operations in the Third World through unauthorized leaks to the news media.

Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, said in an interview for this article that "a lot of those people [in the administration] don't want oversight." He charged that the administration has "screwed up" its covert attempt to change the Marxist government in Nicaragua and that every one of the CIA's covert paramilitary operations "is a problem."

In addition, Durenberger asserted that special interest groups and "right-wing senators" have been driving the administration's secret diplomacy in Afghanistan and Angola; that Secretary of State George P. Shultz has allowed himself to be intimidated by these groups while CIA Director William J. Casey has shown a hypersensitivity to criticism. Durenberger said his own well-publicized marital troubles have been spotlighted by conservative Reagan supporters as a means of attacking his credibility as Senate oversight chairman.

The feud has grown so acrimonious that administration officials are suggesting it could soon endanger the future of the oversight process. Already, some top officials are charging that oversight is out of control. A few have suggested privately that the House and Senate intelligence panels be abolished and their responsibilities consolidated in one tightly controlled joint committee.

President Reagan, in a classified letter to Durenberger, warned a few months ago that the oversight process was seriously "at risk" and blamed Congress for a hemorrhage of national security data to the news media.

The Senate oversight leadership in turn has charged that the Reagan administration has systematically disclosed highly classified intelligence information to influence public debate and to bully Congress into supporting its overseas adventures.

At the core of the dispute are the far deeper divisions between Congress and the White House over what has emerged as a key feature of the administration's foreign policy—the so-called Reagan Doctrine, which by nature is carried out behind a cloak of secrecy provided by the CIA.

The doctrine has never been defined by Reagan personally and its outline has been most extensively shaped by the conservative cadres that seek to frame the Reagan foreign policy agenda. But if Reagan has no
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provide them with battlefield intelligence. As the fighting has steadily escalated in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Nicaragua and now Angola, questions in Congress have grown steadily louder.

The president is now seeking $100 million in new aid for counter-revolutionary, or contra, guerrillas in Nicaragua. The CIA is involved in operations to destabilize Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi and in low-level support to antigovernment paramilitary forces in Ethiopia, according to intelligence sources.

The administration's attack on oversight, according to congressional leaders, must be weighed against the phenomenal budgetary support the congressional oversight committees have marshalled for the intelligence community. The intelligence budget of about $10 billion in 1979 has more than doubled to $24 billion this year and is projected to triple by 1990. This support has allowed the Carter and Reagan administrations to rapidly build up the most sophisticated, high-technology intelligence apparatus in the world.

Still, the frustrations are deep and bitter in this "partnership," largely because the intelligence buildup has restored a formidable and lethal capability in the CIA's directorate of operations to mount covert paramilitary operations over which Congress has little control. It was inevitable, according to some senators, that once the CIA had this capability, it would find new "opportunities" to justify using its most controversial instrument.

The president is required to send only a secret notification to the intelligence oversight committees that such operations are under way.

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